

# Research Brief

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## Parents pleased with child care options and quality Survey results suggest contrasting child care priorities

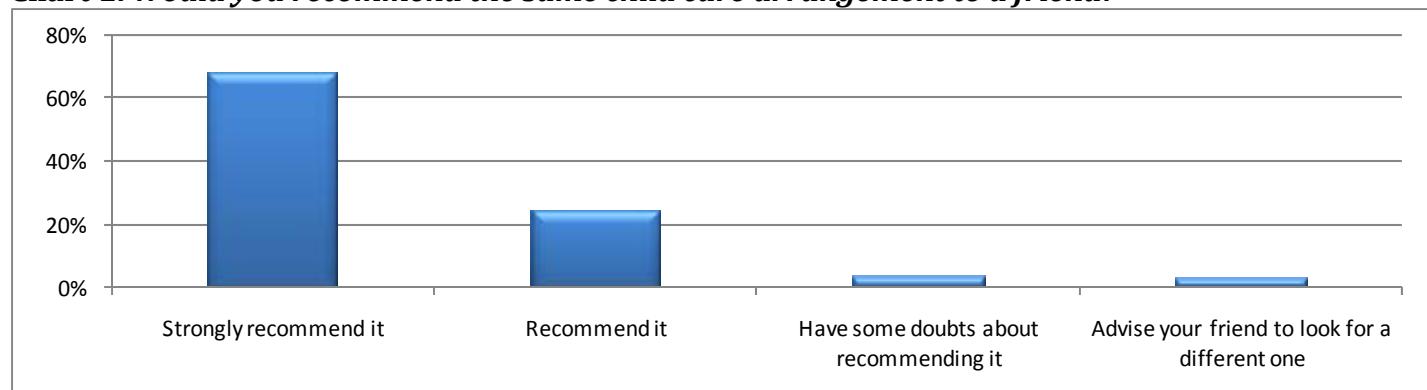
A recent survey of 430 parents in southeastern Wisconsin finds the vast majority are satisfied with the quality of their child care arrangements and their options for child care. In fact, most say they would not change anything about their child care arrangement if they had the chance, and nearly two-thirds report a willingness to pay more for their current child care.

The high rates of satisfaction may contradict other research on child care quality in the region which, using more empirical methods, has found that the majority of child care providers are of mediocre quality.\* Parents' general satisfaction with the quality of their child care providers also may explain why legislative efforts to improve child care quality in Wisconsin have found little grass roots support. Parents may be satisfied with what experts may deem lower quality child care either because they are not aware the quality is not optimal, or because they value different aspects of quality than do researchers and policymakers.

The survey results suggest that future efforts to regulate child care quality should take into account the high levels of parent satisfaction and acknowledge that, in some ways, the priorities of parents, the state and experts in the field are not the same. While parents may seek and be most satisfied with a warm and loving caregiver, state policymakers have been considering new incentives that emphasize the educational quality of caregivers.

The survey also reveals, however, that parents are uncertain about how and whether their child care provider is regulated by the state and are not very knowledgeable about child care accreditation. In addition, there were significant demographic and geographic differences among the sample with regard to the type of child care used and the affordability of care. For example, Hispanic parents were much less likely to utilize child care, and urban residents were much less likely to feel they had enough affordable child care options.

### Chart 1: Would you recommend the same child care arrangement to a friend?



\*Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership, *Quality of subsidized child care in Wisconsin*. Issue Brief No. 6, 2002.

## Key findings

- Parents give their child care providers very high grades for safety, as well as for the caregivers' warmth and support. Caregivers' skills and the learning environment score the lowest, although they are still high.

**Implication:** Parents may assess quality based first on feelings of security and lovingness, with more measurable elements being somewhat less important.

- Parents are confused about the types of child care regulation and many do not factor them in when choosing care.

**Implication:** There is a disconnect between parents' and policymakers' priorities.

- Urban parents feel differently than suburban and rural parents about certain elements of quality.

**Implication:** Urban parents' experiences are dissimilar to suburban and rural parents' experiences; policies or regulations may impact them differently.

- While the majority of parents feel their child care arrangement is affordable and they are even willing to pay more for the same care, lower income parents are more likely to feel that they had to take whatever they could get in choosing child care.

**Implication:** Satisfied parents feel they are paying at least as much as their care is worth. However, for those with lower incomes, even those highly satisfied with their provider, the range of choice is restricted.

- Most parents surveyed did not spend time in formal child care settings as children and very few attended preschool.

**Implication:** Judging quality requires newly acquired knowledge and cannot rely on the experience of previous generations.

## Data and methodology

The 106-question survey was administered by telephone between September 18 and October 3, 2007 to 430 residents of southeast Wisconsin by Lein/Spiegelhoff Inc. market research. We surveyed only parents or guardians of children age 5 and under, and asked to speak to the parent or guardian with the most knowledge of child care arrangements. For families with more than one child, we asked about the care arrangements for the child having celebrated the most recent birthday. Respondents were given the choice of answering the survey in English or Spanish, but all participants chose English.

We asked parents to indicate the child care arrangement in which their child spent the most time each week on a regular basis, defined as at least four hours a week for several weeks in a row. Care types included non-parental care in the child's own home; care in someone else's home; care in a day care center or preschool program; or child care not used regularly. For children in Kindergarten, we asked parents to indicate the main arrangement in use during the times the child is not in school. We included both formal and informal arrangements in our definition of child care; for example, a sibling or other relative that cared for the child more than four hours per week would be included.

The survey was conducted by random dial from a list of parents in the seven-county southeastern Wisconsin region. To ensure representativeness, we had quotas for Hispanic and African-American parents.

The final survey sample is largely representative of the region. However, the sample has disproportionately more Waukesha residents and Hispanic families than the region as a whole, and is moderately skewed more toward higher incomes than the region as a whole. Because we surveyed only parents, the sample has a higher rate of marriage, and because we asked for the parent most knowledgeable about child care arrangements, the sample is disproportionately female.

**Table 1. Survey respondent demographics by child care type**

	English speaking	Female	Married	Working full-time
<b>In-home nonparental care</b>	98%	76%	81%	54%
<b>Someone else's home</b>	99%	77%	83%	77%
<b>Day care/preschool</b>	97%	76%	85%	58%
<b>No child care used</b>	91%	72%	84%	43%
<b>Whole Sample Average</b>	<b>95%</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>54%</b>

Table 1 illustrates a fairly equal distribution across child care types by language, gender and marital status, with some variation in the “working full-time” category. About half of the parents using day care/preschool or using care in their own home work full time, while less than half of those using no child care

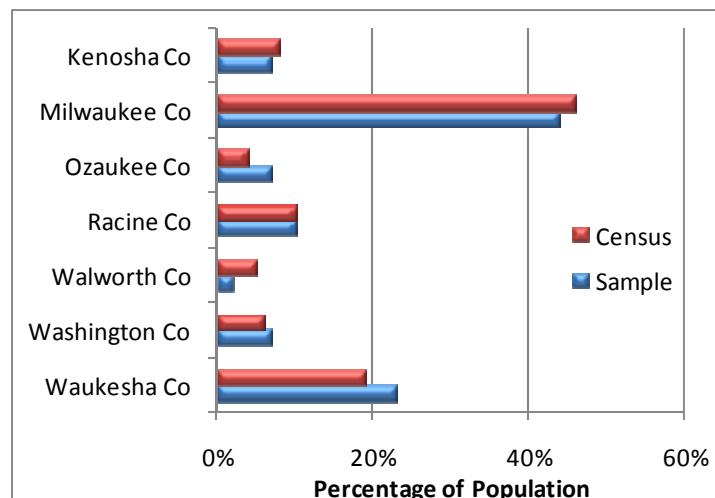
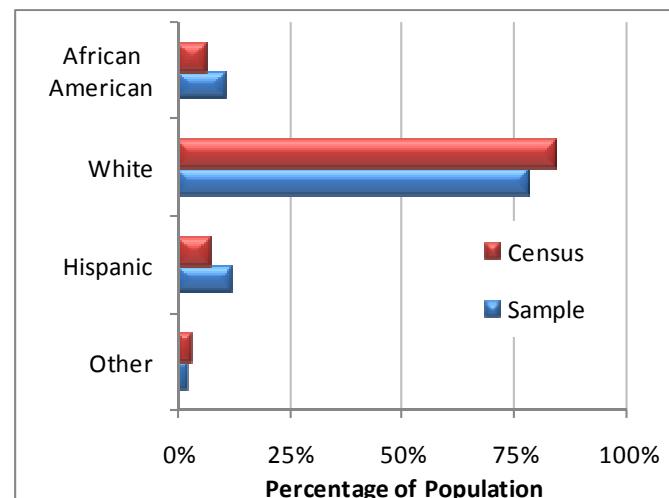
**Table 2. Survey respondent racial/ethnic demographics by child care type**

	Total sample	In-home non-parental care	Care in someone else's home	Day care/preschool	No child care used
<b>African American</b> N=43	10%	17%	6%	13%	7%
<b>White</b> N=334	78%	76%	86%	80%	70%
<b>Hispanic</b> N=52	12%	7%	8%	6%	19%
<b>Other</b> N=14	2%	0%	3%	3%	3%
<b>Total*</b>	<b>102%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>103%</b>	<b>102%</b>	<b>99%</b>

\*Totals surpass 100% where respondents chose more than one racial/ethnic group.

Table 2 indicates African-American respondents are disproportionately more likely to use in-home care or day care/preschool while Latino/Hispanic respondents have a disproportionately high rate of not using child care. Caucasian respondents, meanwhile, were disproportionately less likely to not use child care.

Charts 2 and 3 show the sample is representative of the region as a whole by county and race.

**Chart 2: Survey respondents by county****Chart 3: Survey respondents by race**

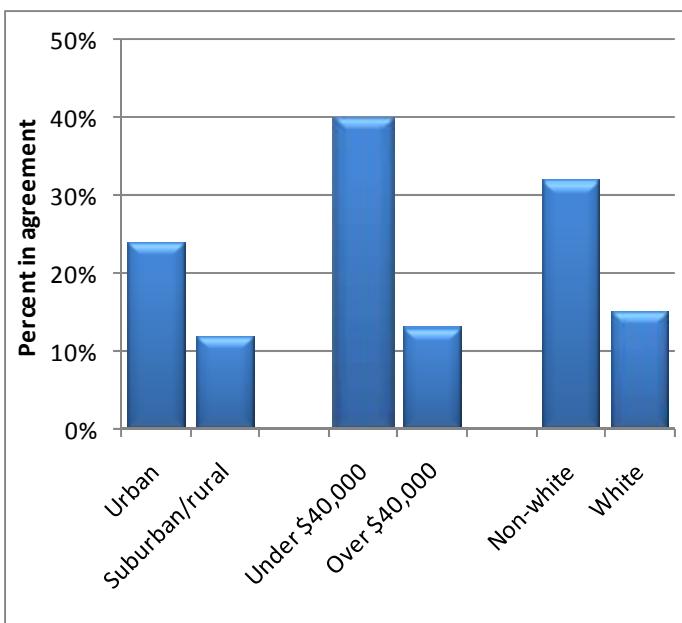
## Knowledge of resources and regulations

Responses of parents surveyed indicate that many are confused about the types of state regulation of child care providers and unaware of resources available to help them find and afford child care.

While only 25% of respondents report they had difficulty finding information about child care options, over half (56%) first found out about their main child care arrangement through a friend, neighbor or family member, indicating that personal networks are very important sources of information for parents. Only 4% of respondents first heard about their care provider through a child care resource and referral service.

Thus, parents seem to be making choices about their child care provider based on a limited universe of information. Despite this, the vast majority of respondents disagree with the notion that they "have to take whatever they could get" in terms of child care. Of those that agree with that statement, urban, low-income, or non-white parents are at least twice as likely to feel that way as were other parents (Chart 4).

**Chart 4: I've felt I had to take whatever arrangement I could get**

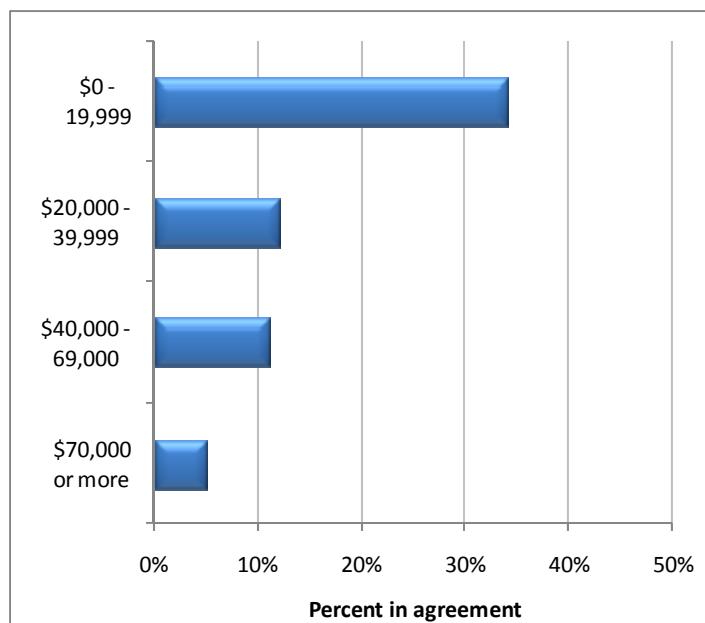


Furthermore, rates of familiarity about the Wisconsin Shares child care subsidy program are low, even among those who would likely qualify for the subsidy. Only 11% of respondents indicate that they are familiar with the program. Familiarity varies with income, as would be expected for a program with income limits on eligibility. As Chart 5 shows, parents in the lowest income group are the most familiar, and yet their familiarity rate is still low.

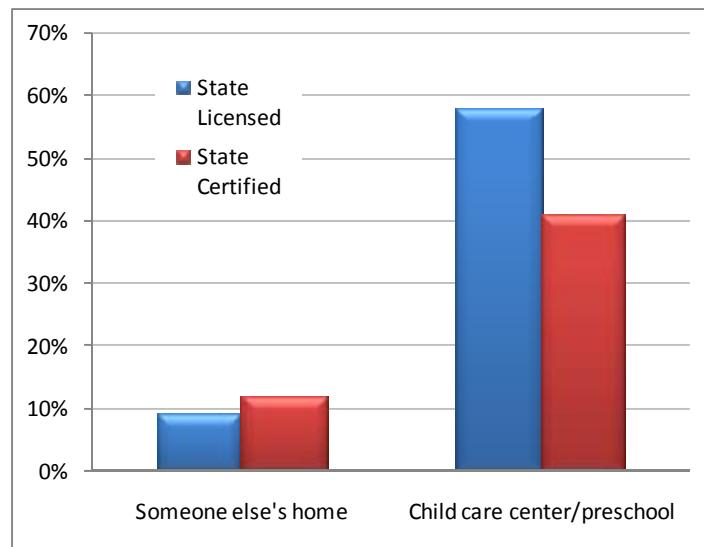
That parents report using informal networks to find child care may explain why they are not familiar with the state subsidy program. There also appears to be confusion about the state's role in the child care system in general, which could be another explanation. As shown in Chart 6 on the next page, parents who report utilizing child care providers that are regulated are confused about the level of regulation that applies to their provider.

Of parents using center-based child care or preschools, 41% report their center or preschool is state certified. This reflects parental confusion, because state certification is applicable only to family child care providers who care for children in a home setting.

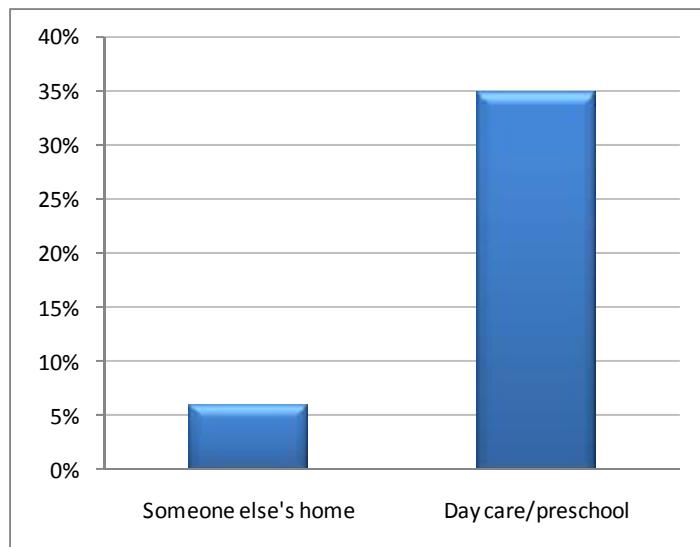
**Chart 5: I am familiar with the Wisconsin Shares child care subsidy program**



**Chart 6: Rates of regulation of providers, as reported by parents**



**Chart 7: Rates of accreditation, as reported by parents**



This confusion calls into question parents' accuracy when asked whether they utilize a regulated provider. Thus, the reported low rates of regulation among parents using care in someone else's home may not necessarily reflect the true rate of regulation among these providers. In addition, because our sample has few low income parents, the true picture may be further distorted, because parents receiving child care subsidies can use only licensed or certified providers.

We also asked parents whether their child care provider is accredited. Parents using center-based care or preschools report having accredited providers at a rate nearly six times that of parents using care provided in someone else's home (Chart 7). The difference is partially attributable to those parents using informal care, such as a relative or neighbor, which is not eligible for accreditation, but also to the high cost of accreditation. Many family child care providers, being sole proprietors, cannot

afford the expense of the accreditation process.

All parents who answered affirmatively to using a licensed, certified, and/or accredited provider were then asked whether the regulatory status and/or accreditation was a factor when they were choosing their child care provider. Over half (56%) of parents using child care in someone else's home report that neither state regulations nor accreditation was a factor when choosing their provider. This compares to less than a third (29%) of parents using center-based care/preschools for whom regulation or accreditation was not a factor.

It seems that many parents, especially those using care in someone else's home, do not view state regulation or the third-party endorsement of accreditation as a proxy for quality. It should be noted that, in total, 38% of parents did not report using a licensed, certified, and/or accredited provider, and thus presumably did not factor those items into their choice, either.

Definitions of state certification and licensing, as provided to survey respondents:

Licensed child care is the highest level of regulation and is available to child care centers, as well as family child care providers who take a 40-hour licensing class.

Certified child care is the level of regulation available to family child care providers who take a 20-hour certification class.

Definition of accreditation, as provided to survey respondents:

Accreditation means that the child care provider has met the requirements of an independent accrediting agency, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

## Parents' perceptions of child care costs

In a marketplace, consumers often use the cost of a good or service as an indicator of its quality. In the child care industry, the main driver of cost is labor. If a child care provider or preschool employs classroom caregivers with college degrees or with many years of experience, the costs of operating would be much higher than those of a provider employing low-wage workers. Presumably, the higher costs would be passed along to parents, who would be willing to pay more for the more qualified workers.

**Table 3: Parent opinions on cost of quality**

	Percent agreeing
<i>I would change to a different child care arrangement if cost were not an issue</i>	23%
<i>I would be willing to pay more than I do for the care I have</i>	63%
<i>The cost of child care prevents me from getting the kind I want</i>	25%

Our survey of parents indicates that in the real world, parents are not acting like typical consumers when choosing a provider and do not necessarily view high cost as an indicator of quality. As Table 3 shows, most of the parents interviewed so valued the quality of their caregiver that they would be willing to pay more for their current child care provider. In addition, most parents did not agree with either the statement, "I would change to a different child care arrangement if cost were not an issue," or the statement, "The cost of child care prevents me from getting the kind I want." Thus,

they were satisfied with the quality of their provider, even if they were not paying top dollar for care.

However, this does not mean that some parents do not feel stretched by the amount they are paying for care. This dichotomy, feeling satisfied by the provider's value while also feeling pinched by the cost, is best illustrated by the answers to our open-ended question: "If you could change one thing about your child care arrangement, what would it be?" The most frequent answer category was *nothing*, but the next most frequent category included items related to cost.

A small percentage of the parents surveyed (11%) are getting help for their child care costs. Because the survey sample is slightly over-representative of higher income families, this is not surprising. However, the sources of help are.

The same percentage of parents report receiving help from friends or relatives (26%) as those reporting help from government sources (26%). About a fifth of those receiving help get it from their employer (19%). The small number of parents utilizing government child care subsidies is especially surprising since the overall survey sample has much higher percentages of families who have received other government benefits (Table 4).

**Table 4: Percent of respondents who have ever received...**

W2	WIC	Food stamps	Medicaid	WI well women
10%	24%	14%	22%	1%

## Parents' perceptions of quality and satisfaction

A survey of parents provides an opportunity to gauge certain unquantifiable aspects of child care quality. While researchers usually point to factors like child-caregiver ratios, staff turnover, and curricula as criteria in assessing child care quality, from a parent's point of view, quality factors might be very different.

There are several reasons why examining child care quality from a parent's perspective is informative. First, parents are acting as consumers when they choose and hire child care providers, and presumably their feelings drive the market for high or low quality caregiving. Second, parents often utilize various types of child care at different points in the lives of their children or with different children, allowing them to gauge quality based on their own experiences over time. This contrasts with researchers, who are more likely to be making assessments based on either a snapshot of time or, if conducting a longitudinal study, only one type of childcare. Finally, parent opinions provide insight into certain important, but subjective, aspects of child care that cannot be quantified, such as how loving the caregiver is or whether the child is happy when in child care.

We utilized a set of questions developed by

Arthur Emlen and colleagues at Portland State University. The 15 survey items do not use the word "quality" but are designed to measure six aspects of quality likely to be most important to parents.

The statements are not abstract, i.e., asking parents about their state of mind. Rather, they focus on parent observations and perceptions of the caregiver or of certain events. The statements are applicable to all types of caregivers, from a classroom teacher to a close relative.

The Emlen scale questions are somewhat limited, however, in that the questions are designed to be appropriate for children of all ages. An additional limitation is that because the statements are quite definite, they can only be asked about the current child care arrangement, with which a parent is presumably at least somewhat satisfied since it has not been abandoned. If the questions had asked about a past child care arrangement in comparison to the current arrangement, the distribution of scores would show more discontent. Finally, like all surveys of this type, respondents are reluctant to provide a socially undesirable answer that would reflect negatively on them as parents.

For each aspect of quality probed, there is a set of statements to which parents can respond *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *often*, or *always*. The scale for each reply ranges from 5 (*always*) to 1 (*never*).

### Emlen 15-Item Scale Questions

#### **My Child Feels Safe and Secure**

*My child feels safe and secure in care.*  
*My child likes the caregiver.*

#### **Warmth of Caregiver Toward my Child**

*The caregiver is warm and affectionate toward my child.*  
*My child is treated with respect.*  
*My child gets a lot of individual attention.*  
*My caregiver is happy to see my child.*

#### **Absence of Risk Factors**

*It's a healthy place for my child.*  
*My child is safe with this caregiver.*

#### **A Skilled Caregiver**

*My caregiver is open to new information and learning.*  
*My caregiver shows she (he) knows a lot about children and their needs.*  
*The caregiver handles discipline matters easily without being harsh.*

#### **A Supportive Caregiver**

*My caregiver is supportive of me as a parent.*  
*My caregiver and I share information.*

#### **A Rich Learning Environment**

*There are a lot of creative activities going on.*  
*It's an interesting place for my child.*

**Table 5: Parental opinions of quality**

	Average
I. My child feels safe and secure	4.78
II. Warmth of caregiver toward my child	4.64
III. Absence of risk factors	4.83
IV. A skilled caregiver	4.44
V. A supportive caregiver	4.67
VI. A rich learning environment	4.49

Overall, parents indicate great satisfaction with their current child care arrangements, as shown in Table 5. For about half of the questions (53%), 80% or more of respondents answered *always*.

Parents are most satisfied in the categories covering safety, security, and the absence of risk factors. The next-highest scores are in the categories measuring the warmth and supportiveness of the caregiver. The categories scoring the lowest, yet still quite high in absolute terms, were those concerned with the skills of the caregiver and the richness of the learning environment.

These results indicate that parents may judge overall quality mostly by their feelings of security and their feelings about the caregiver as a person. Parents' perceptions about quality criteria that most often concern researchers, such as caregiver skills and the learning environment, are somewhat less positive. This may indicate a gap between what parents perceive as a high quality child care provider and what research tells policymakers to perceive as a high quality provider.

Table 6 presents the average scores for each facet of quality by age of child and child care type. The breakdown reveals differences in the way parents in various situations feel about their care. Though in some cases the number of parents in a category is too small to draw solid conclusions, it is noteworthy that for four of the six quality categories, the lowest average score comes from those using center-based care or preschool. Those categories include safety and security (infants), warmth of caregiver (toddlers), skilled caregiver (infants), and supportive caregiver (ages 4 & 5).

**Table 6: Parental views of quality: average scores by age of child and child care type**

	Safe and secure	Warmth of caregiver	Absence of risk factors	Skilled caregiver	Supportive caregiver	Rich learning environment	N
<b>Infant</b>							
In home, non-parental	5	5	5	5	5	5	2
Someone else's home	4.5	4.65	5	4.4	4.7	4.2	5
Day care/preschool	4.32	4.71	4.89	4.19	4.68	4.71	14
<b>Toddler</b>							
In home, non-parental	4.94	4.87	4.85	4.49	4.82	4.26	17
Someone else's home	4.89	4.81	4.81	4.59	4.71	3.94	31
Day care/preschool	4.77	4.44	4.74	4.32	4.68	4.66	31
<b>Age 3</b>							
In home, non-parental	4.8	4.8	5	4.47	5	4.7	5
Someone else's home	4.93	4.82	4.93	4.44	4.87	4.3	15
Day care/preschool	4.73	4.58	4.83	4.49	4.63	4.67	48
<b>Age 4 &amp; 5</b>							
In home, non-parental	4.82	4.66	4.71	4.65	4.71	4.41	17
Someone else's home	4.92	4.81	4.88	4.58	4.92	4.25	12
Day care/preschool	4.77	4.56	4.82	4.29	4.49	4.66	56

Thus, we felt it important to delve further into the responses of parents using center-based care and preschools. While most of our analysis considers child care centers and preschools as one category, due to the wide variations in their focus on learning and allowable class sizes, we disaggregate the category into four types of programs: center-based care/day care, Head Start/Early Head Start, preschool, and pre-Kindergarten.

We found Head Start parents to be the most satisfied overall; however, with only 13 parents, it would be imprudent to draw conclusions from such a small sample. As Table 7 shows, among the other three types of programs, satisfaction levels are very similar, with the smallest degree of difference being in the categories of skilled caregiver and rich learning environment. The lowest levels of satisfaction were of parents of pre-Kindergarteners with respect to the warmth and supportiveness of the caregiver.

All parents were also asked satisfaction questions beyond the 15-item quality scale. To learn more about the caregiver's skills and the learning environment, we asked questions about what their child is learning and the resources available.

As Table 8 shows, parents are confident that there are plenty of toys, books, and music available for their children each day, but somewhat less certain that their child is read to everyday.

**Table 9: How good is caregiver at helping child...**

	Recognize shapes	Recognize colors	Get enough physical activity
Infant	1.5	1.3	1.3
Toddler	1.5	1.4	1.4
3 year-olds	1.4	1.3	1.3
4 & 5 year-olds	1.3	1.3	1.4

**Table 7: Parent views of quality by type of child care center or preschool**

	Child care center	Head Start	Pre-school	Pre-K
I. My child feels safe and secure	4.75	4.72	4.76	4.65
II. Warmth of caregiver toward my child	4.62	4.74	4.64	4.5
III. Absence of risk factors	4.78	4.85	4.85	4.73
IV. A skilled caregiver	4.62	4.76	4.59	4.53
V. A supportive caregiver	4.59	4.82	4.60	4.48
VI. A rich learning environment	4.64	4.75	4.66	4.58
N=	<b>99</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>42</b>

**Table 8: Educational environment each day...**

	Reads aloud	Plenty of toys, books, music
Often	17%	6%
Always	60%	88%
Don't know	9%	0.4%

In addition, when asked to score on a scale from 1 (excellent) to 4 (very bad), parents give high average scores for caregiver skills with regard to helping children recognize shapes and colors, as well as ensuring children get enough physical activity. The worst marks come from parents of infants and toddlers regarding recognizing shapes (Table 9).

The percentage of parents reporting their child's caregiver has a degree in education or early childhood development ranges from 23% for children cared for in someone else's home to 69% for children in center-based care/preschools. However, 16% of all parents were unsure.

With such high scores for quality, especially with regard to caregiver warmth, it is not surprising that parents are very satisfied with their current child care arrangements. When asked whether the current main arrangement was the best child care arrangement they have ever had, 71% feel that it is. When asked to name the best thing about it, the most frequent response category includes the caring and loving nature of the caregiver (Chart 8). Other frequently-mentioned categories include a good educational experience, that the caregiver is a family member, and convenient location.

### Parents' own experiences

The majority of parents who responded to our survey were not enrolled in child care when they themselves were children. Sixty-nine percent of respondents were cared for by a parent in their own home as their primary child care arrangement, 5% attended a day care center, and 4% attended a preschool program. Much of the generational contrast in child care usage patterns can be explained by the high number of women who are in the workforce now.

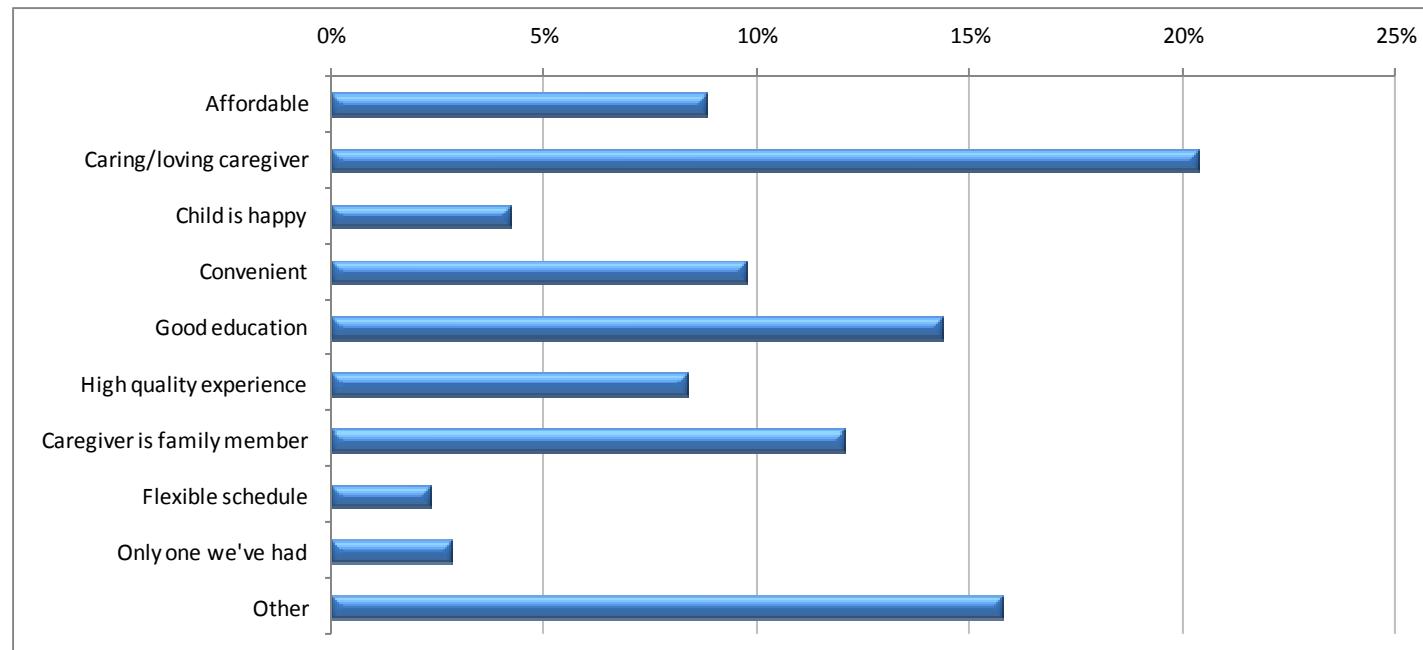
It is impossible to capture the extent to which lack of a personal frame of reference may impact how a parent assesses the quality and effectiveness of his or her various child care options, although it is clear that today's parents cannot rely on the experiences of previous generations.

### Conclusion

Parents in southeastern Wisconsin clearly have a high level of satisfaction with their child care providers. Parental satisfaction always should be considered good news, but in this case there may be unforeseen consequences on public policy direction.

A relatively recent public policy imperative has been a push to enhance the educational quality of early childhood care as a means of better preparing children for school and overcoming the impacts of poverty in the home lives of disadvantaged children. Our survey results indicate, however, that there is a mismatch between what parents find most satisfying about their child care arrangements and what policymakers may determine to be the most important indicators of quality. The survey also revealed that few parents found out about

**Chart 8: Why is this arrangement the best you've ever had...what's the best thing about it?**



their arrangements via referral services that provide measurable indicators of quality for various child care options.

The facet of quality that seems to be the most satisfying to parents is the caregiver's personal qualities and whether he or she is loving and caring. While this is a very important aspect of quality care, it is difficult to quantify and promote from a public policy point of view. Measurable aspects of quality, such as meeting certain state regulations, are much easier to promote with tax or other incentives.

This disconnect between what parents desire in a child care provider and what policymakers can measure complicates any legislative efforts to improve quality. While parents in southeastern Wisconsin do not appear to be clamoring for higher quality options, researchers have found evidence – from caregiver qualifications to features of instruction and safety – that there is need for quality improvement in child care.

Policymakers should be aware that parents may not be the natural ally some would presume when it comes to new regulations or incentives for quality improvements.

This is especially true with regard to the higher cost of higher quality care. While parents are so satisfied with their current care that they feel it is a good value, they may at the same time be feeling a cost pinch and may not be willing to pay more for quality improvements. Also, to the extent that new quality criteria or efforts to link public funding with quality force certain providers to go out of business, there could be resistance from satisfied parents.

Finally, while all parents were highly satisfied, there were some differences among demographic groups. Parents in urban areas are less likely to feel they have enough options and are more likely to feel their provider should make some changes to improve quality. “One size fits all” policy changes may affect these populations differently.

## What do child care providers say about their quality?

- How do providers choose whether to pursue accreditation?
- Why do child care providers leave their jobs?
- What aspects of the job require better training?
- Do providers work with local schools on school readiness?

These questions and more were asked of child care providers in southeastern Wisconsin. Results of the Forum's child care provider survey will be released later this spring.

**Stay tuned!**